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ABSTRACT

In the mid-1980s, partly through new developments in curriculum and instruction, a new assessment option has arisen under the banner of alternative assessment. The basic idea appears in several guises: "authentic assessment" (implying that standardized tests are not authentic), "performance tests," and "portfolios." The goal of writing portfolios is to provide an opportunity for a richer, more authentic assessment of their achievements, to show their potential given adequate time and resources. A survey of a broad array of portfolio practices around the country finds that: (1) the portfolio approach is energizing the professional standing of classroom teachers; (2) respondents showed a distaste for evaluation; and (3) teachers had little concern about technical matters like validity and reliability. Individual teachers interpret the portfolio concept quite differently in different settings. If portfolios are taken seriously, most students react seriously. One way to connect parents and schools is to place the students in a central role through the portfolio. Barriers to alternative assessments are substantial: time, money, motivation, and institutional support. The greatest hope for realizing the promise of portfolios may spring from the local school and the classroom teacher. Two caveats need to be observed: assessment practice and policies should be consistent for all teachers in a given school; and the audience and purpose for the assessment need to be established. Educators have made great strides during the past 50 years--the portfolio concept is but one example. (RS)

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Ahead to the Past: Assessing Student Achievement in Writing

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"Examinations are formidable even to the best prepared, for the greatest fool may ask more than the wisest man can answer" (Charles Caleb Colton, *Lacon*, 1830).

A brief history

We all know about examinations—tests, assessments, exhibitions, call them what you will. They try your skill and knowledge, you can fail, you can't get help, and you must work alone. In the 1940's, Mrs. Aiken, and thousands of teachers like her, administered tests in reading, writing, spelling, and math to her fourth grade every Friday morning. The tests were not a surprise; Mrs. Aiken always examined material covered earlier in the week. Monday morning she returned the papers with grades and comments. The right answer was important, but so was "showing your work," neatness, and a myriad other facets. By Monday night, the consequences took shape when parents asked, "How did you do on your tests?" A tightly linked, locally controlled scenario: the teacher decided what to teach and how to test it; students were expected to prepare and perform; parents handled praises and penalties.

By the 1950's, achievement testing had taken a new turn. Standardized tests became increasingly commonplace as school administrators responded to cries for public accountability. These instruments differed in several ways from teacher-based approaches: externally rather locally developed, multiple choice rather than "writing," technically validated as "reliable," yearly rather than weekly, and feedback in months rather than days. The new tests had their critics from the outset—questions about validity (do they measure

anything worthwhile?), about cultural bias (minorities do more poorly than majorities), and about top-down control.

Nonetheless, under pressures for improved productivity and performance, standardized tests have come to dominate public discussion and professional practice in U.S. schools. In 1983, Americans were told by the National Commission on Excellence in Education that they were "A Nation at Risk." They were warned that "the educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation." These conclusions were based on standardized test data.

Although in some arenas older multiple choice formats are being questioned, today we still take the standardized format for granted, not just for accountability, but also for guiding instructional decisions, for placing students in special classes, and for evaluating programs. Now, the federal government has turned to national examinations and standards as a "lever" to improve schooling. This movement is steadily gaining strength, but the emphasis on top-down testing seems off the mark. If the nation expects students to meet *higher standards* of achievement, the keystones will be a demanding curriculum and effective instruction, and the key players will be classroom teachers. The focus of any effort toward higher standards needs to be internal (the classroom) rather than external (the statehouse).

Current proposals for national testing are diverting attention from the need to improve educational opportunity for students, especially those at risk for school failure. The *realities* are that achievement of middle-class students in the U. S. equals or surpasses most other nations, and the U. S. provides less support (educational and otherwise) for poor children than virtually any other developed nation.

In the mid-1980's, partly through new developments in curriculum and instruction, a new assessment option has arisen under the banner of alternative assessment. The basic idea appears in several guises: *authentic assessment* (implying that standardized tests are not authentic), *performance tests*, and *portfolios*. Whatever the label, these practices share certain features:

- Students must demonstrate that they can actually do something, rather than simply pick the "right" answer.
- Projects are substituted for test items, providing depth rather than breadth.

- The teacher's judgment replaces mechanized scoring.

Changes in writing instruction have been critical to the evolution of alternative assessment. In the 1970's, writing comprised little more than filling in blanks or correcting grammar and spelling. Writing instruction then shifted toward long-term projects with significant review by teachers and peers. Proponents of this approach to writing instruction viewed standardized tests with scorn, as totally inadequate for what they viewed as essential. Teachers relied instead on their own judgments about collections of student work. And so the alternative assessment movement was born.

What is new about the new assessments?

Many features of alternative assessment hearken back to earlier times, when teachers were in control. A critical question arises: What have we learned during the past half-century that moves us beyond Ms. Aiken's practice?

The answer comes in part from the *writing portfolio*, a folder containing samples of student work. Sometimes the portfolio is little more than a manila folder containing whatever a student decides to stuff into it, or whatever the teacher happens to assign. In exemplary situations, however, the student assembles a collection of materials during the school year: reviews of books read, reading notes, rough drafts, conference memos, final drafts and published versions. Some tasks are assigned, others are self-initiated. Some are substantial projects, others a page or less. Each individual assembles his or her own folder, but many of the projects are collaborative.

The goal is to provide students an opportunity for a richer, more authentic assessment of their achievements, to show their potential given adequate time and resources. While the concept has appeal, questions quickly emerge. What should be included in the folder? How should the student's work be evaluated? What standards should apply? What should be done with the results? How can various audiences be informed of results?

These questions and concerns have not slowed the movement. While no official tally exists of the number of teachers who are experimenting with portfolios, some form of alternative assessment can probably be found in more than a quarter of U.S. elementary schools—by mandate, by professional choice, by curiosity, by fad.

Life in the trenches

What is actually "happening" to classroom assessment where teachers are experimenting with alternatives? The Center's Portfolio project has surveyed a broad array of portfolios practices around the country. Our findings show that, first, across wide variations in contexts, the portfolio approach is energizing the professional standing of classroom teachers. Many are committing substantial time and energy in rethinking their work, and they feel revitalized. A frequent theme is "ownership." Teachers talk about "being in charge" of instruction. By leading teachers to develop tailored assessments, portfolios give teachers a renewed understanding of teaching and learning processes.

Second, respondents show a definite distaste for evaluation. They feel uncomfortable about setting standards or assigning grades. Their reaction is captured by the comment of one teacher, "I wish grades would just go away!"

Third, teachers have little concern about technical matters like validity and reliability. While most have taken courses in test theory, abstractions are no match for the immediacy of performance assessments.

Viewed from the classroom, then, the portfolio movement is cacophonous—intense action, a sense of hope, a willingness to experiment. As an example of this intensity and experimentation, consider the portfolios in Margaret Klemikov's class at Orion School in Redwood City, California. Students collect work to reflect evidence of growth in areas where they have set specific goals for themselves. The teacher keeps excerpts of children's work in a large, annotated chest of student files. And student portfolios serve as the centerpiece of teacher-child-parent conferences that are facilitated by the student.

On the other hand, the movement can be seen to also reveal a lack of purpose and structure. At higher levels in the educational hierarchy, publishers and administrators are busily engaged in "standardizing" the approach. The state of Vermont offers a poignant example of the new trials and issues raised with this agenda. Recent reports suggest the state portfolio scores aggregated from local schools lack reliability due to differences between raters. Even with extensive staff development, arriving at a consensus when rating student writing has not been achieved. Other districts, such as the local elementary district in Gillette, Wyoming, to "study" the question of portfolios

and their potential, have asked schools to design and pilot their own unique approaches, encouraging diversity even between teachers at the same site. While the portfolio movement certainly seems to mesh with innovative practices in curriculum and instruction, there is no solid direction for the movement that has emerged.

Teachers are in a bind. On the one hand, the dedicated teacher is easily caught up by a workshop on "authentic assessment," ready to take charge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, imbued with the sense of being a true professional, and part of a team. The idea of instruction based on real projects designed for genuine audiences has immediate appeal. On the other hand, portfolios entail serious burdens of time and effort, at times with little support and considerable risk. After the first flush of excitement, questions pour out—how to design the portfolio, how to handle the assigned curriculum, when and how to evaluate, what to do about report cards and grades, how to justify teacher judgment?

The burdens and risks are particularly serious in urban schools serving at-risk students, where the practice for decades has been central control of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Schools are told what materials to use, how to use them, and how to test the results. Teachers are overwhelmed by student needs, academic and social, and by a torrent of well-intended programs. Quantity outweighs quality: teach more, teach harder! Under such conditions, professional autonomy and experimentation are difficult to initiate and harder to sustain.

Given this range of circumstances, individual teachers understandably interpret the portfolio concept quite differently in different settings. Directed by the district to "do portfolios," teachers may simply order students to place their worksheets in manila folders that then languish in filing cabinets. At the other extreme, teachers become applied researchers, for whom assessment takes shape as *planning, collecting data,* and *interpreting evidence.*

What's in it for students?

"Is this a test?" Students often appear to react to performance-based assessment with the comment, "This doesn't seem like a test!" Portfolios can be prepared over time, with guidance and support, with opportunities to revise and polish, in a cooperative environment. To be sure, some entries may be formal tests, but students' grades do not depend on a single high-stress

performance. Moreover, in the best instances of alternative assessment, the task is interesting and engaging.

In the most recent California state assessments of reading and writing, for instance, students worked on a single story over three untimed sessions. During the first session they read an excerpt, made marginal notes, and responded with brief reactions to various elements of the story: "Which character did you like best? Why? How would you end the story? What did the story mean to you?" In a second session, small groups of students discussed the story further, and jotted down notes in preparation for the third session, an individual writing assignment.

The bottom line is that, if portfolios are taken seriously, most students react seriously. An important consideration is the authenticity of the task. If portfolios and performance assessments entail boring work on boring topics with inadequate preparation and support, the "best" students will do as told, but many students will not understand what is expected of them.

What should parents do?

In well-to-do communities, standardized tests certify children's privileged status. Tests are a gateway; competition is the key to success, and standardized tests are the ultimate in competition, explicitly ranking students. For these reasons, the middle-class school that announces the replacement of grades and tests by portfolios, especially when these include collaborative student work, often encounters parent resistance. In poor communities, the reaction to alternative assessments is mixed, depending on family structure, ethnicity, language. Families are often disconnected from the school—they do not (or cannot) attend conferences or serve as classroom volunteers, may not ensure that their student completes homework, and may know little about their student's progress. Newsletters, notices, and report cards may not reach the homes, and may not receive the same attention as in middle-class households.

This characterization is stereotypical, to be sure. Not all middle-class parents are observant and supportive of the school's efforts, and many poor parents make Herculean endeavors on behalf of their children. But the stereotype conveys some realities, and changes in a teacher's assessment practices are unlikely to have much impact on parents unless the school makes a concerted effort to reach out to the home.

One way to connect is to place the student in a central role through the portfolio. In the Student-Parent-Teacher model, the student runs the parent-teacher conference, using the portfolio as the focus for discussing his or her school work—goals for the school year, evidence of what he or she has been doing, a self-assessment of progress, and plans for future work. This strategy has several important features. First, it places responsibility for learning and assessment on the student's shoulders, encouraging self-reliance. Second, parents often learn more from listening to their child than listening to the teacher. Third, discussion between parent and teacher can be more equitably balanced than the parent-teacher meeting with the teacher clearly in charge.

The portfolio plays a central role in this model. Because the portfolio is the student's creation, the student becomes the assessment "expert." Moreover, since the portfolio now has a genuine purpose and audience, the student has more reason to take seriously the job of formulating and constructing the folder, and reflecting on the contents. The strategy does raise questions: How are teacher and parent to react to the student's achievements? What about grades? How to prepare students for the responsibility?

Where is the movement heading?

Will alternative assessments eventually assume equal importance alongside standardized tests? This outcome is by no means guaranteed—they are in a battle. Alternative approaches to assessment still must prove themselves. A few teachers will persist in "taking charge," no matter what. But the pressure toward authentic assessment also carries promise for broader change—for redefining curriculum and instruction, for yielding more valid indicators of achievement outcomes, and for enhancing the professional development of teachers.

The barriers are substantial: time, money, motivation, and institutional support. The counter currents are also substantial: the impetus for a national test and curriculum, the continuing claims of teacher incompetence and institutional inadequacy, fears that mediocre schools will undermine economic progress. Conceptual and technical support for alternative assessment is weak, and researchers see lean years ahead.

Nonetheless, several forces may eventually converge to support the vision of authentic, classroom-based assessment. Assembly-line schooling is now rejected by the industrialists who provided the original model. Exclusive

reliance on multiple-choice tests is now questioned by "hardheaded" policy makers for practical reasons: the instruments are easily foiled, and teaching students to recognize the right answer is poor preparation for genuine responsibility. A "no cheating," competitive mentality does not fit a world where cooperative skills matter as much as individual accomplishment.

Interestingly, this movement towards alternative assessment is even being considered by proponents of standardized national tests, although in such a context, the role of the classroom teacher's judgment and her control over the instructional program will inevitably be comprised. Rather than being a support to alternative assessment, the co-opting of the idea by national testing advocates may, in fact, result in mis-directing the entire concept.

The greatest hope for realizing the promise of portfolios may spring from the local school and the classroom teacher. Two caveats need to be observed, however. First, assessment practices and policies should be consistent for all teachers in a given school. Individual teachers "doing portfolios" are likely to have little impact on students. Second, the audience and purpose for the assessment must be established. Teachers are unlikely to sustain the effort entailed in portfolios if no one pays attention, if the only recognition of a school's efforts are the yearly newspaper reports of standardized test scores. An important feature of the portfolio-based student-teacher-parent conference is the introduction of alternative assessment in a genuine role in the school community.

At present, most of what we know about student achievement comes from outside the classroom; pieces of paper, designed by experts far removed from the classroom, briefly appear in the classroom, touched by the tips of a Number 2 pencil, then off to a computer that generates printouts of numbers no one understands—"Johnny's *normal curve equivalent* in reading is 57."

We have much to learn from teachers' voices. For example, if we had listened to them in the 1960's, they would have told us something like this: "My fifth graders are not writing well, by and large. Their compositions are closer to what I regard as third or fourth grade work." In the 1980's, when the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the "nation's report card," began to look seriously at writing, the results showed that teacher comments along these lines would have had considerable merit. Teachers might well have added: "The reason my students don't write well is that I can't spend

much time on writing, given all the material we have to cover in reading and math—and besides, writing is not tested, and so there's not much pressure to emphasize it."

Standardized tests are not likely to go away, but it does seem both feasible and desirable to restore balance to the assessment of student achievement. The classroom teacher is arguably in the best position to make informed judgments. Mrs. Aiken did a pretty good job. We have made great strides in curriculum, instruction, and assessment during the past fifty years, and so we can imagine numerous ways to improve on her techniques—the portfolio concept is just one example. But the teacher's role as a professional has been eroded in recent decades, and realizing the potential of innovative assessments will require restoring professionalism. These tasks are especially daunting in a time when more is expected of schooling, and when children come with such enormous needs and so little support. But they are all the more important for these very same reasons.

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The National Center for the Study of Writing, one of the national educational research centers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, is located at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, with a site at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Center provides leadership to elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities as they work to improve the teaching and learning of writing. The Center supports an extensive program of educational research and development in which some of the country's top language and literacy experts work to discover how the teaching and learning of writing can be improved, from the early years of schooling through adulthood. The Center's four major objectives are: (1) to create useful theories for the teaching and learning of writing; (2) to understand more fully the connections between writing and learning; (3) to provide a national focal point for writing research; and (4) to disseminate its results to American educators, policy-makers, and the public. Through its ongoing relationship with the National Writing Project, a network of expert teachers coordinated through Berkeley's Graduate School of Education, the Center involves classroom teachers in helping to shape the Center's research agenda and in making use of findings from the research. Underlying the Center's research effort is the belief that research both must move into the classroom and come from it; thus, the Center supports "practice-sensitive research" for "research-sensitive practice."

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